PATTERNS OF CULTURAL CHANGE IN THREE NATIVE AMERICAN NOVELS

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Between World War I and World War II, several novelists including Zane Grey, J.J. Mathews, Frances Gillmor, Frank Waters, Oliver La Farge, and Edwin Corle became concerned with the conflicts between the traditional cultures of Native Americans and the ever-encroaching white world. The novels these authors produced are important because they emphasize the folk beliefs of traditional cultures and show how modern changes require traditional cultures to either evolve or die. In such novels the protagonists and their ethnic groups are forced to confront the dominant white culture. Although the different authors are in no agreement regarding the fate of the Native American, the conflicts they portray are similar: typically, two cultures vie for the patronage of protagonists who somehow bridge the gap between the modern world and a traditional society. Students of folklore can profit by reading these novels since they dramatize the adaptability and accomodation of folklore and folk ideas during a period of rapid cultural change.

In this paper I will discuss three such novels: Zane Grey's The Vanishing American (1925),[1] Frances Gillmor's Windsinger (1930),[2] and Edwin Corle's People of the Earth (1937).[3] These novels form a continuum ranging from Grey's totally pessimistic vision to Corle's optimistic reappraisal. In addition to providing a gradient of theories regarding social change, these novels all deal with the same society, the Navajo. Viewed as an entity, the novels present a composite view of Navajo folklore, religion, and social structure and provide a complex view of a specific Native American culture as it functioned at a particular point in history.

Zane Grey's The Vanishing American is totally pessimistic. As a repository of folklore and ethnographic fact, it is the weakest of the three novels but is considered here because when published as a serial in 1922, it was a major blockbuster and through this novel many of the inequities of reservation life were exposed for the first time. Readers interested in a similar novel which is rich in accurate data on the life of a particular tribe are urged to read J.J. Mathews' Sundown.[4] Mathews, himself an educated Osage, is uniquely qualified to write about reservation life and the problems of those who attempt to bridge the gap between two cultures.

The hero of The Vanishing American is Nophaie, a Navajo who is kidnapped as a child, sent to the East, and raised as a white. He goes to college, becomes an All-American football player, and emerges as a well-respected person. In spite of his remarkable success in the white world, however, he feels unfulfilled and at the age of 25 he returns to his people.

Nophaie's return to the reservation coincides with the social and economic upheavals of World War I. In addition to impersonal economic factors, the

white teachers and missionaries attempt to force their will upon the Navajo. "The injustice to them is the blackest of the white man's baseness. The compulsory school system for the Indian boys and girls has many bad points. The bad missionary is the apostle of hate and corruption."[5]

The ranking governmental official, a man named Blucher, proves to be pro-German and encourages the Navajo to circumvent governmental policies related to the war effort. Besides making the Navajo a pawn in an international war, Blucher actively cheats the people he is paid to help. "For instance, the Half-breed Noki Indian Sam Ween, is Bluchers' /sic/ interpreter. Blucher pays Sam twenty dollars a month when he pays him at all."[6] The government, however, provides Blucher with much more to hire an interpreter, but the corrupt agent pockets the remainder.

If the conditions of the Navajo are not pitiful enough, they receive another gift from the white man, a deadly plague of influenza. "Three thousand Nopahs died of the plague and from one end of the reservation to the other a stricken, bewildered, and crushed people bowed their heads. The exceedingly malignant form of the influenza and the superstitious convictions of the fatalistic Indians united to create a deadly medium."[7]

Throughout the story, Nophaie strives to find his true identity, to break through his veneer of whiteness, and to recover the long-suppressed Navajo within him. "I am an infidel . . . I tried to return to the religion of my people. I prayed--trying to return to the religion of my people. I prayed--trying to believe in the Indian's God--I will not believe in the white man's god . . . . This Morgan /the missionary/ kills the Indian's simple faith in his own God--makes him an infidel--then tries to make him a Christian. It cannot be done."[8] Being a strong-willed person, Nophaie constantly seeks his true identity, but each time he fails.

Finally, Nophaie falls victim to the influenza and, although he becomes gravely ill, he survives. The remarkable cure causes his traditional beliefs to return, and in gratitude he sets forth on a pilgrimage to a sacred Indian place. As a result of over-exertion caused by the journey to the shrine, Nophaie suffers a relapse and dies. Ironically, he succeeds in rediscovering his personal identity and his traditional god, but dies as a direct result of his enlightenment. Nophaie's death is clearly linked to the fact that he insisted upon paying homage to his own faith and his true self.

The theme of The Vanishing American is that the Navajo, like Nophaie, will never be emotionally at home in the white man's world, but returning to the ways of tradition is suicidal. The Native American, the novel implies, is constantly exploited by the agents of the whites who take advantage of the people even though they constantly mouth pious clichés. Although The Vanishing American contains little actual data of interest to the folklorist or ethnologist, Grey's novel does demonstrate a view of how many Native American societies were destroyed through white contact.

Francis Gillmor's Windsinger is the story of a Navajo ceremonial leader who is both a symbol of the conservative aspects of Navajo culture and of the breaking down of traditional ways. The hero, Windsinger, is born during an eclipse of the moon, an event which, according to Navajo belief, dooms the child to immediate death. Just before the ceremonial murder, however, a white mechanic named Mender of Windmills intervenes and using verbal slight-of-hand, he convinces the father to spare the child. Because of these events, Windsinger is a benefactor of the eclipse of traditional Navajo culture. He is not only saved by a weakening of the old ways, but actually owes his life to the same white man who is carrying modern technology to the desert.

In spite of the fact that Windsinger owes his life to a weakening of tradition, he becomes a ceremonial leader of his people. Although he loves his wife, the Clear-Eyed One, and wants only to be with her, his ceremonial responsibilities draw him away from home for days at a time. He finally realizes that "when they come for me to sing I must go. My life has been built for that."[9] The ceremonial duties command a high price, but Windsinger performs for a nominal fee if a poor family requests his services.

In addition to performing traditional ceremonies, Windsinger actively seeks the traditional gods in order to learn new songs and ceremonies. Eventually his wife, a skeptic, becomes annoyed at such activities and concludes: "Often has the moon fainted when a child was born and the child was killed. Better that you had been killed, according to the old men's wisdom, than live your years seeking the gods whom men cannot find."[10] The Clear-Eyed One eventually becomes so angered she kicks Windsinger out of the house, complaining that he would even take her son and fill him "with dreams and songs. I taught him to herd sheep and to deal with traders. I taught him the ways of men. An now he thinks like you--only of new songs that you will bring him from the gods."[11]

Saddened by his wife's reaction, Windsinger mounts his horse and rides through a thunderstorm, only to be hit by lightning and left for dead by Son of the Eagle who finds him on the desert the next day. Believing Windsinger has been killed by the gods, no one will retrieve the body since "The gods have killed him . . . let the gods take care of him."[12]

Windsinger, however, has only been stunned and when he returns the Navajo assume he is the agent of divine intervention. They believe that "The gods killed him--and the gods have sent him back . . . They sent him with a warning to the People."[13] To make matters complete, Windsinger actually believes he has visited with the gods and that they have told him of an impending flood destined to destroy the desert and all who do not move to high ground. Because of Windsinger's good reputation and his apparent return from the dead, the Navajo take his prophesy seriously, and, abandoning their farms and crops, they retreat to the mesa tops. The flood, however, does not occur, and as a result the people lose faith in Windsinger, treat him with scorn, and publicly humiliate him. He becomes an ignored and broken man.

Windsinger's position in society is never fully restored, but his wife and Mender of Windmills rally to his side; they don't believe in his magic, but they do realize he is a good and noble man. The Clear-Eyed One sticks with him in the most troubled of times, because Windsinger needs her. Mender of Windmills commissions Windsinger to perform a medical ceremony, allowing the humiliated old man to practice his trade and again function within society.

Windsinger finally becomes ill and learns first hand that the ceremonial cures of tradition are impotent. Seeing that nothing will save him, he urges his wife to waste no more money on magic and he accepts death. After dying, Windsinger's home is burned in the traditional manner. The hogan bursts into flame just as Mender of Windmills, the white man who saved Windsinger from infanticide, arrives with his new apprentice, a member of the next generation of the white technocrats.

In Windsinger, white society is not depicted as exploitative, but as the wave of the future. Although the conservative Windsinger is a noble and honorable man, he is portrayed as a Navajo of the past. It is significant that both Windsinger and Mender of Windmills contain "Wind" in their names and have the duty of providing water for the people. Windsinger uses magic and ceremony to cause rain, while Mender of Windmills uses technology to tend wind-powered wells. Although Mender of Windmills is supplanting Windsinger, they are good friends and the mechanic helps Windsinger many times and in many ways.

In Windsinger, the modern or non-traditional Navajo is not a displaced person, but is able to systematically confront the larger world. The Clear-Eyed One realizes the ways of the past are changing and that new skills and new ways are required. She is able to teach her son the new "ways of men" which are trading and sheep herding.[14] Her name is obviously metaphoric: she is a Navajo who "clearly sees" what the future will bring.

Besides depicting the rise and fall of a traditional leader in a modernizing world, Windsinger contains much information on the folklore, religion, and social structure of the early 20th-century Navajo. In Gillmor's novel, Navajo myth and lore can be seen within a social context.

While Windsinger concentrated almost entirely upon the difficulty a traditionalist person has in dealing with rapid technological and social change, Edwin Corle's People of the Earth is directly concerned with Navajo who attempt to combine elements of both the white and the red worlds. It concentrates on the pain and suffering inherent in such a course of action. Like Windsinger, People of the Earth combines a novel of social change with an intimate account of Navajo folklore, culture, and belief.

The central characters in People of the Earth are Walter Stratton and Frances Long, two Navajo who are trained at a school run by whites. As a result of their participation in two conflicting cultures, they become displaced people in both worlds. Although Walter could have gone to the University of Arizona or even Columbia, he returns to the reservation. Considering what to do he

realizes, "You couldn't completely live white when there were elements in you that belonged to the People no matter how well you realized that the white world was a profound one and that the People didn't really know very much. There was a little red living necessary, too, and you couldn't forget it. Perhaps it was just a little, just a little red dot, but it meant something and it had to be there."[15]

Although he returns to the reservation to find his true self, Walter meets hostility and disappointment. Eventually he becomes an apprentice silversmith, but his hopes for marriage are dashed when his brother, a ceremonial leader, advises the prospective in-laws against the marriage. Walter, they are told, has been "spoiled by white living."[16]

Thwarted by his traditionalist brother, Walter briefly returns to white society, only to be sent to jail for starting a barroom brawl. A product of two cultures, Walter is a "man without a country," a totally displaced person.

The history of Frances Long is similar to that of Walter. After her white schooling and a period of employment, she returns to the reservation and eventually marries a traditionalist Navajo named Eddie Hawk. The marriage doesn't work because her husband "is all Navajo and his family didn't like me because I didn't weave or tend sheep or do anything they wanted me to do."[17] In addition, she had been taught the fundamentals of birth control and avoids getting pregnant because she doesn't like the thought of having Eddie Hawk's children. As a result, the marriage breaks up and Frances leaves the reservation. Unable to find a steady job, she is eventually forced to become a prostitute.

For most of the novel it appears that both Walter and Frances will live as marginal people outcast by both the whites and the Navajo. Nevertheless, Walter and Frances find each other, are united in marriage, are cleansed of their pasts by Walter's brother and begin life on the reservation as respectable members of the tribe.

This transformation occurs because Walter and Frances are able to combine the beneficial elements of white culture with traditional Navajo ways. Previously both Walter and Frances had tried to discard their white education and revert to a completely traditional Navajo lifestyle. This failed miserably for both of them. Finally they decide to acknowledge their Navajo ethos and personalities while retaining the beneficial aspects of white culture. In Walter's words: "The white man knows almost everything there is to know. He's got control of the sea and the earth and the air. He calls it science and he counts on it. Then he's got religion and that's kind of an excuse to explain things he doesn't know yet. Because all he's learned from sea and earth and air hasn't done him much good. He can't get along very well and not many white men have found what the People call 'walking with beauty--the beautiful path of life'. White people aren't happy enough. They're all afraid of each other and they want to get more money all the time. They know many times more than the

People but I can see where the People really live better. They don't have as much trouble living. When I see both ways of living I can see where a man who took some from both would be better off."[18]

Combining the best of the Navajo and the white cultures, Frances and Walter become the prototype of the new Navajo, a people who can benefit from the technological progress of the whites while remaining essentially Navajo in terms of their personal goals and ideals. Walter realizes "in a way we shall live with the people. But you and I are different. We are new. We can't be white people and can't be red people, but we can be new people. Our world is just beginning and the old one is dying. We are two of the first."[19] Walter and Frances are the prototype of a new and more vital phase of Navajo cultural history.

Although The Vanishing American and Windsinger are realistic novels which depict the fate of generations of Native Americans, Edwin Corle's People of the Earth emerges as a prophetic novel. In recent years various Native American institutions and tribes have, like Walter and Frances, utilized the techniques and skills of the white world to emphasize, enhance, and preserve traditional cultures. Native American lawyers, using legal expertise gained from the white society, examine old treaties. Corporations and marketing institutions sponsored by specific tribes insure a reasonable profit for Native American artisans and are supplanting the exploitative "white trader." As Edwin Corle has shown, culture change does not necessarily doom the folk life of traditional societies. Folk cultures can be preserved through a careful utilization of the skills of the modern world.

NOTES

1. Zane Grey, The Vanishing American (New York: Harper, 1925).
2. Frances Gillmor, Windsinger (New York: Minton, Balch, and Company, 1930).
3. Edwin Corle, People of the Earth (New York: Random House, 1937).
4. John Joseph Mathews, Sundown (New York: Longmans, 1934).
5. Grey, p. 14.
6. Ibid., pp. 108-09.
7. Ibid., p. 282.
8. Ibid., pp. 101-02.
9. Gillmor, p. 102.
10. Ibid., p. 142.
11. Ibid., p. 146.
12. Ibid., p. 157.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 146.
15. Corle, p. 275.
16. Ibid., p. 304.
17. Ibid., p. 374.
18. Ibidl, p. 391.
19. Ibid., p. 390.